

SUGGESTIONS FOR HELPING YOU START AN AGRITOURISM VENTURE

An agritourism farm is a value-added farm or ranch that provides pleasure as well as recreation, information, education or other experiences or services for which the public may or may not pay admission to participate in and/or purchase an agricultural product or activity.

First Steps

1. If you have a dream of starting an agritourism farm, you need to write down what your ideas or goals are. You are limited only by your imagination teamed with your resources.
2. You can entertain and/or educate school groups, church groups, adult groups, professional tour groups, small groups, large groups, families, and on and on. You need to assess the activities you plan to have on the farm and the size of your staff vs. the population within 25 – 50 miles. If you are near a large population area, you will attract visitors fairly quickly with minimum selected marketing. If there are other similar farms nearby, and the population is not near a larger area, you will require fewer staff. You can partner with local crafts persons.
3. Staff needs are determined by activities – drivers for hayrides, cashiers in a gift shop, activities which require personnel for safety reasons, lookout stations in a corn maze, help with parking, greeters at the entrance, staff to conduct orientation or educational classes, etc.
4. If there is an educational/heritage/cultural component to the farm, you will need to create and keep sufficient copies of handouts or materials, depending on grade levels if for schools.

Beginning a Business

5. A business plan and a strategic plan are always good ideas for beginning a new business. Your local community college may have a Small Business Center to help you with these plans in a one-on-one confidential basis, free of charge. If you need financial assistance from a bank or credit union, having a business plan shows forethought and a professional approach. The Small Business and Technology Centers are located on the UNC campuses and provide similar services. Setting a fee for your agritourism activities is the way you will make money. NC REAL can help you assess your market and determine how much money you might make. Contact your local extension office for additional information.
6. Never think that you will over price your farm's attractions. Some agritourism farmers offer packages at different fees. Most agritourism farmers charge \$6 – 7 per person. Check with your schools to see what they are charged for visits. If there are children who are unable to pay, ask local businesses to create a school fund that will pay for children who would be unable to come because of the charge. www.ncagr.com
7. Explore what other agritourism farms charge by visiting their websites at the General Store website at www.visitncfarms.com and look around at the various farms listed. You can find the agritourism webpage at the link "Find an Agritourism Farm" at www.ncagritourism.com.
8. Liability insurance is sometimes a challenge – finding it and affording it. Ask your insurance agent. If the agent is unable to write coverage, email the agritourism office for a list of insurance agents who help farmers with agritourism liability policies. You may also want to explore providing health insurance for your staff.
9. The North Carolina legislature passed an agritourism liability law (see "Limit Liability for Agritourism Farms" – www.ncagr.com/agritourism) in the summer of 2005. The law has text for a sign that informs visitors at an agritourism farm that there are activities and sites on the farm which require responsible actions on the part of the visitor. If the farmer keeps the farm in safe working order and has signs posted, the chance of liability litigation is lessened. Signs may be handmade, but have to follow the requirements in the law. Professional signs are also available at low cost from the Agritourism Office.

Other Support Agencies and Networks

10. The NCDA&CS Food and Drug Division, Marketing Division, or the NCSU Food Science staff can assist you if you are interested in processing a commodity before it is packaged or marketed for sale.
11. You can join the free ANA list serve through membership in the Agritourism Networking Association (ANA) to chat and ask questions of other agritourism farmers. Call or email the Agritourism Office for more information on ANA and its benefits.

Local Issues and Regulations

12. You will need to check with your local planning board on zoning or other land use restrictions or property tax issues.
13. Depending on the activities you plan, you may need to check with the local health department. ADA accessibility is sometimes required for entrances, exits, and restroom facilities.
14. If you have not already incorporated your business, you may want to check with an attorney and/or a CPA on business incorporation and estate planning issues. You can find an attorney who specializes in business and estate planning through the local or state Bar association. Consideration needs to be given to how your venture, or entity, will be operated. Often, through lack of attention, sole proprietorship is automatically chosen. However, alternative entities exist including partnerships, limited-liability companies, and corporations such as Subchapters C and S, as well as a variety of trust arrangements. Income and property tax consequences vary significantly, depending on the legal entity chosen. Liability to third parties is also a consideration in structuring your business, as is ease of operation within a chosen structure.
15. Your local economic development office may have information of other local development activities or future initiatives that might affect what you are planning either positively or negatively.
16. Planning for adequate parking is necessary. Conversation with your local police or sheriff's department will begin a good working relationship.
17. Find out what the sign ordinances are for advertising your farm on local roads. More expensive highway signage is available through NC DA&CS and DOT programs.

Marketing Your New Agritourism Farm

18. Build relationships with your local Convention and Visitors Bureau or Chamber of Commerce – join the Chamber and invite the membership to an “Alive after Five” social at the farm.
19. You can start off low-key with a one-page flyer for special events. If you don't like computers, get a high school student who is creative to design a one-pager for you. Give the important information – who: name of farm, what: activities/events, when: hours of operation, where: location, map (simple drawing or text directions), how much: admission fee(s) per package or how you decide to charge. Invite local television stations to cover special events.
20. Visit your local schools – make personal visits (call ahead) to the principals of the schools you want to visit your farm. Take a one-page flyer about the opportunities at your farm, emphasizing lessons about nature, food production, animal life, fiber resources, the history of farming, the history of the land surrounding the farm, and other items of interest.
21. Creative off-site signage will draw visitors to your farm. A “brand” or “logo” for your farm will create a visual effect for visitors. Local ordinances and state regulations will determine what type of off-site signage can be used.

22. On-site signage is different. It is used to attract attention to activities and explain or inform visitors about exhibits and activities. High school or community college art class students may be good resources for creating signage at low cost.

23. A well-trained staff will create most important first impressions for visitors. Clean and attractive grounds, smiling faces, pre-planned ways of handling emergencies, flexibility in arrangements, and a willingness to let the customer be “right” will create experiences that visitors will remember in a positive way. The best marketing is “word of mouth.” Visitors who have negative experiences will tell seven other people about that experience. Hospitality training is often available through local extension offices.

24. Gift shops are fun for visitors. Even if the inventory is small, attractive settings are a must. Pleasant but not overpowering scents such as cinnamon, apples, pumpkin pie or fresh lemon are attractive draws. A guest book can be an invaluable tool for newsletters and mailings and tracking demographics. Coupons are good giveaways. For an unexpected rainy day, give away plastic bags or disposable hats or even inexpensive umbrellas to visitors who may be inconvenienced by the weather. Be sure your logo is on any giveaways!

25. The internet is definitely growing as a popular way to advertise. If possible, develop your own website. If you cannot do this, NC DA&CS can create a webpage for you for free on the General Store. Contact the Agritourism Office for more information. We can connect your website to ours.

26. Press releases are useful depending on your media market. There may be local writers who can create attractive press releases for you at very low cost.

27. Consider special events featuring natural holidays or other local interests.

28. Allow your visitors to “personalize” their visit by “naming” or “adopting” an apple or peach tree, a grape vine, a baby lamb, sheep, colt, rabbit, chick, etc. Send out an occasional newsletter via email or regular mail and give an update on the progress of Amy’s little goat, or Matthew’s apple tree, or Bill and Suzanne’s grape vines.

Networking with Other Agritourism Farmers

The North American Farmers Direct Marketing and Agritourism – nafdma.com – is a national organization for agritourism farmers, farmers market members and other agricultural professionals with a membership fee of only \$150 and access to a ‘chat’ room for members. The association hosts a national meeting in the early part of each year where participants have three days of agritourism farm tours and three days of workshops.

The North Carolina Agritourism Networking Association is a 300-member strong organization for agritourism farmers, winery and vineyard owners, extension agents and other rural tourism professionals. It is designed to foster networking and mentorships among farmers. Members are connected via an internet list serve hosted by the Agritourism Office in the Marketing Division of the Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services.

This information is designed to help potential agritourism farmers do their research and gather information about developing an agritourism farm. It is designed to help find the answers to some of the questions in Starting Your Agritourism Venture. The other publication in the series is Business Resources for Agritourism Farmers, published by the Agritourism Office of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. The documents are available at www.ncagr.com/agritourism, can be mailed by request and can be emailed.

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